EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most problems facing the Albemarle-Pamlico (A/P) Estuarine system arise directly or indirectly from human activity. Pressures on the system from these activities will continue to increase as a result of future population growth and economic development. Technical solutions to many land use and water quality problems affecting the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuarine system are available; but institutional or human-related obstacles exist to their implementation. Successful resource management will require strong support from different segments of the public. Such support will best be achieved by understanding public attitudes and knowledge.

The specific purpose of this study, then, was to evaluate peoples' knowledge and attitudes about natural resources in the A/P Estuarine system and management alternatives designed to protect these resources. A combination of social science research methods was used to analyze a wide range of public attitudes. The information was collected in a scientific telephone survey of 831 people selected at random from across the A/P Study area. We also conducted 30 in-depth personal interviews with some of the most knowledgeable scientists and leaders in North Carolina.

The results show that most respondents had received quite a lot of information about water pollution. The mass media clearly play the major role in providing citizens with water quality information. Almost everyone received information from television and newspapers. On the other hand, relatively few people had gotten information from the government or environmental groups. People do receive information from such groups or agencies indirectly through the mass media. The types of information provided through mass media channels may be somewhat superficial and could tend to focus on dramatic problems and controversial issues.

We found considerable variation among different information sources in terms of perceived credibility. University scientists were seen as most credible. This is likely due to their perceived expertise, as well as their unbiased perspective. Environmental groups were also seen as credible, probably because they are seen as representing the public interest, rather than private interest. Quite a few groups, including government agencies, are also given a relatively high level of credibility. On the other hand, statements from those groups that are seen as having a private, vested interest (i.e., industry and developers) tend to be viewed with considerable suspicion.

Although the public has received a good deal of information about water pollution issues, this does not necessarily mean everyone will have a lot of knowledge about resource management issues and activities. Most respondents, however, appear fairly knowledgeable about certain major issues. For example, respondents have a basic understanding of the notion of a watershed. Many do recognize that land use can have a major effect on water quality. One area where respondents were